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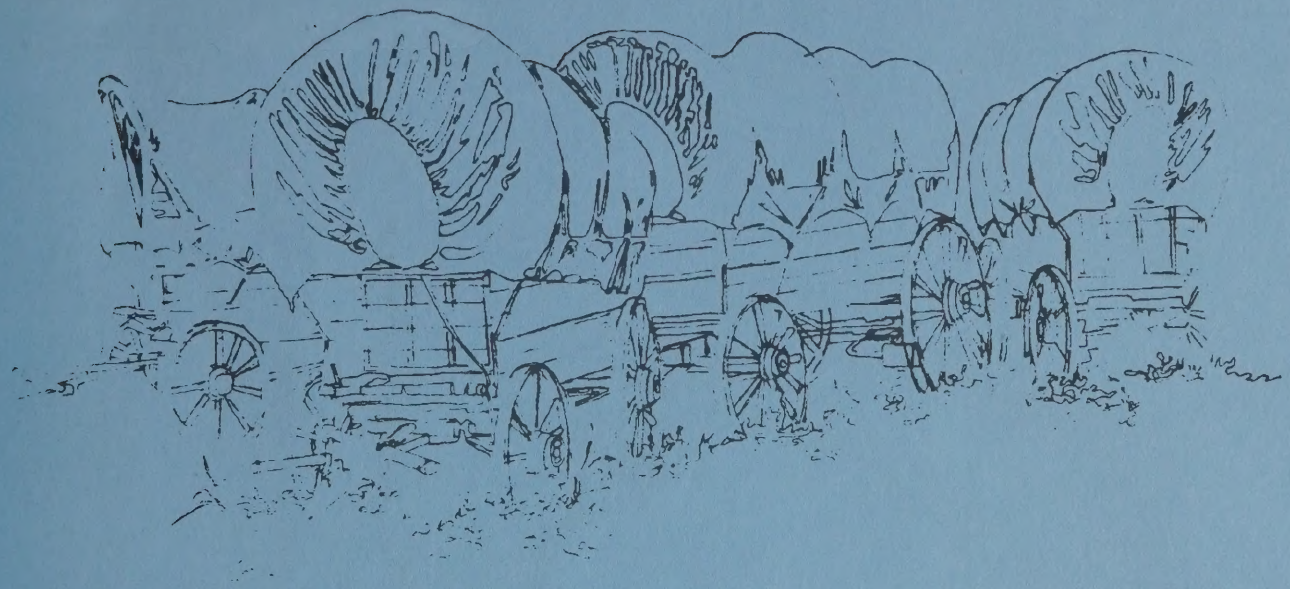

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On the trail to tragedy...
the Donner Party in Wyoming
~Adventures in the Past~

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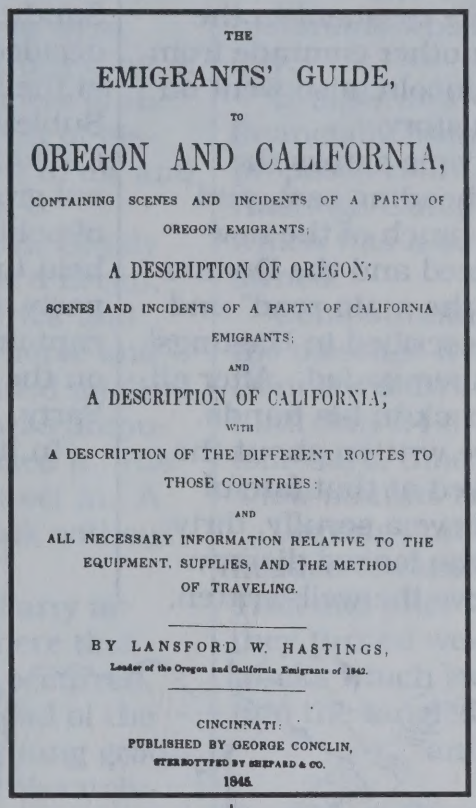


THE

EMIGRANTS' GUIDE,

TO

OREGON AND CALIFORNIA,

CONTAINING SCENES AND INCIDENTS OF A PARTY OF OREGON EMIGRANTS;

A DESCRIPTION OF OREGON;

SCENES AND INCIDENTS OF A PARTY OF CALIFORNIA EMIGRANTS;

AND

A DESCRIPTION OF CALIFORNIA;

WITH

A DESCRIPTION OF THE DIFFERENT ROUTES TO THOSE COUNTRIES;

AND

ALL NECESSARY INFORMATION RELATIVE TO THE EQUIPMENT, SUPPLIES, AND THE METHOD OF TRAVELING.

BY LANSFORD W. HASTINGS,

Leader of the Oregon and California Emigrants of 1842.

CINCINNATI:

PUBLISHED BY GEORGE CONCLIN,

STEREOTYPED BY SHEPARD & CO.

1845.

Most people are familiar with the "end" of the Donner, or Donner/Reed Party in the winter of 1846/47. It was (and still is) the most famous incident of cannibalism in American history. The very horror of being snowbound in the Sierras helped spur the growth of various cutoffs on the Oregon Trail. In addition to death by cholera, childbirth, Indians, and a multitude of accidents, being eaten by your companions was added to the list of hazards of overland travel.

The "story" of the Donner Party in Wyoming is a story of chance meetings, poor communication, bad decisions, coincidence, uneasy feelings, bad luck, and perhaps simply fate.

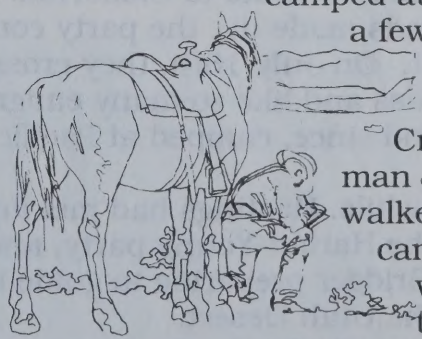
To many historians, the outcome of the Donner Party was a culmination of small isolated mistakes. According to Dr. Gary Topping in a recent article in the Utah Historical Quarterly, "If ever a group was doomed at the beginning it was the Donners."

Other theories say that the Donners were doomed when they purchased Lansford W. Hastings' *Emigrants Guide to Oregon and California.* In a brief aside in his guidebook, Hastings stated, "The most direct route, for the California emigrants, would be to leave the Oregon route, about two hundred miles east from Fort Hall; thence bearing west southwest, to the Salt Lake; and thence continuing down to the bay of San Francisco, by the route just described." At the time of writing, Hastings had not actually traveled the route across the Utah desert.

The nucleus of the group, which later became known as the Donner Party, included two brothers, George and Jacob Donner, and James Reed. Each was wealthy, lived in Illinois, had a large family and they started out with three wagons each. One of Reed's wagons was literally a palace on wheels. It was a two-story affair heated with a stove. The wheelbase of the giant wagon was over 86 inches, as compared to an average width of 58 to 60 inches. The Reed wagon not only slowed the group's travel as it frequently fell behind the rest of the wagons, it also was a constant reminder of wealth to the poorer members of the group.

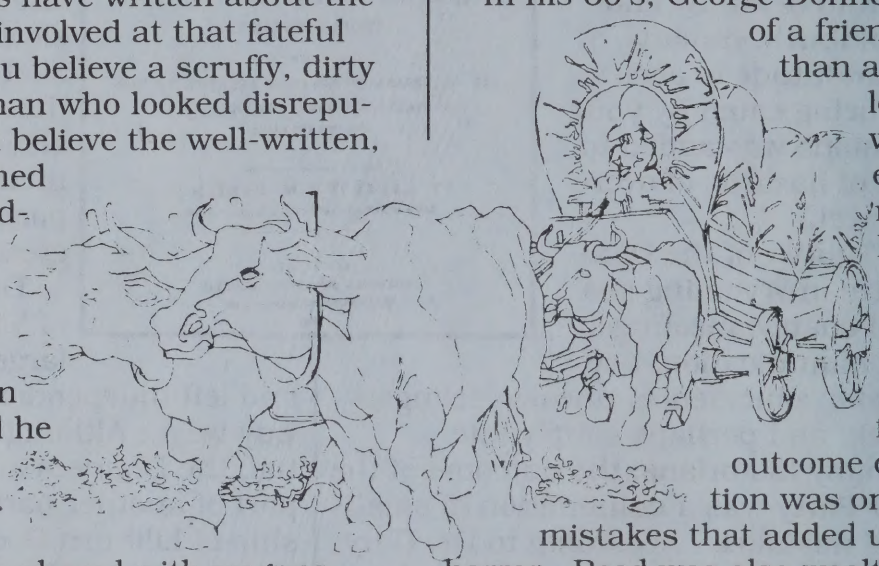
During the second week of May 1846, they joined a large group of emigrants and left Independence, Missouri on their way west. Although wealthy and influential, the Donners and Reeds were just part of another party under the leadership of Lillburn Boggs, ex-governor of Missouri. On May 30th, Reed's mother-in-law, Sarah Keys, died and was buried along the trail near present-day Manhattan, Kansas. Continuing across the plains without incident, the travelers crossed into Wyoming.

One of those chance meetings that makes people later ask "what if?" took place on the night of June 27th. While camped at Fort Bernard, a few miles from Fort Laramie on Laramie Creek, mountain man James Clyman walked up to the campfire. Clyman was a legend in the history of the fur trade. He came west with Ashley in the early 1820's and knew the country as well as any man. Besides, Reed and



Clyman were old brothers-in-arms, having served in the same regiment in the Black Hawk War. Another comrade from that regiment, Abe Lincoln, also went on to make a name in history.

Clyman had just come across the route *with* Hastings heading east, and Clyman didn't think much of the new cutoff. He warned Reed and the Donner brothers to "stick to the main road" and not take the cutoff described in Hastings' Guide. Reed was unpersuaded. After all, he was holding the book in his hands. Many historians have written about the human nature involved at that fateful meeting. Do you believe a scruffy, dirty old mountain man who looked disreputable, or do you believe the well-written, recently published book you're holding in your hands?



One member of the party, journalist Edwin Bryant, decided he would take Hastings' route. Bryant didn't want to be encumbered with wagons (heeding part of Clyman's advice), so he sold and traded his outfit for a string of pack animals and pressed ahead.

Compounding the dilemma of Clyman's warning, a few weeks later on July 17th, Reed and the Donners were shown a letter from Hastings at South Pass offering to "personally" guide emigrants across his new route to California. So, their minds made up, the party continued west. On July 18th, they crossed South Pass and like so many emigrants before and since, camped at Pacific Springs.

Meanwhile, Hastings had met another group, the Harlan-Young party, and was at Fort Bridger preparing to guide them across the Utah Desert.

On July 19, the Reeds, Donners, and their fellow travelers camped at the Little Sandy crossing. Here the original group decided to split. The next morning, most of the families headed over to the Sublette Cutoff on their way to Oregon or California and the remainder of the original group headed to Fort Bridger. Typical of politics along the Trail, an election was held to determine the leadership of the party and George Donner was chosen as captain of the company. From that point on the group was known as the Donner Party.

In his 60's, George Donner was more of a friendly patriarch than a dynamic leader. He was considered a kindly man who loved his family and many children. Some historians feel that the outcome of this election was one of those mistakes that added up to the final horror. Reed was also wealthy, but he was a younger, more robust man and perhaps better suited for leadership. The ratio of able-bodied men to women and children was also a factor in the group's eventual fate.

Another telling incident which occurred while the party was camped on the Little Sandy was the "adoption" of Luke Halloran. Halloran was "consumptive" and had been abandoned to die alone a few days before by the group with whom he was traveling. A charitable person, George Donner's wife Tamsen took Halloran in as one of her own and cared for him. Later, when Halloran died of his ailment in the Utah Desert, it turned out he wasn't a "penniless waif" as most of the party thought. Gold, totalling $1500, was found in his belongings and he had willed the money to the

Donners. Because the Donners were already wealthy, this caused quite a bit of dissension in the poorer members of the party. Halloran's story has a bit of historical irony; imagine being left to die and being rescued by the Donners.

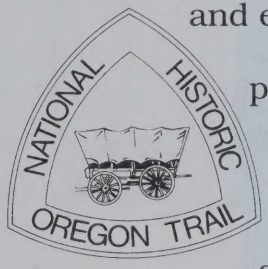
Somewhere between the Little Sandy and Fort Bridger, young Edward Breen, the son of Irish emigrants Patrick and Margaret Breen, fell from his horse and broke his leg. The recommended medical procedure for the broken leg was amputation, but the young lad refused it. His luck held and gangrene didn't set in. A month later he was able to walk without crutches.

On July 28th, the Donner Party arrived at Fort Bridger. It was here that one of the most fateful errors occurred. Hastings was several days ahead of the Donners leading the Harlan-Young group across his cutoff through the Wasatch Mountains. And the going was next to impossible. Edwin Bryant was also ahead of the Donners with his pack string and he was struggling with the route. Bryant sent a letter back to Fort Bridger to be delivered to his friends the Donners. The letter told the Donners *NOT* to take Hastings' route. Jim Bridger and his partner Louis Vasquez never delivered the letter. Not receiving the message has sparked controversy among historians which is still disputed to this day.

Bridger and Vasquez stood to gain financially from emigrants using the proposed route, all travelers on the Hastings Cutoff would pass by the fort which was a business establishment they owned.

Compounding the error of not getting the message from Edwin Bryant, the Donners didn't depart from Fort Bridger until July 31st. They had rested there four days, time which would haunt them a few months later.

Leaving Fort Bridger, the Donners headed toward Fort Hall on the Main Trail and after traveling a few miles north they turned west, following a recent set of tracks which led them out of Wyoming into the tangled canyons of the Wasatch, and eventually, into history.



Much of the Donner's path across Wyoming is on public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management. Visiting the various sites along the Trail can be a rewarding experience. With a few exceptions, the land surrounding the Donner's route looks just like it did 144 years ago when they passed through Wyoming. Maps showing the route of the Oregon Trail are available at BLM offices.

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